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Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“A Sit-down with Jesus”

Text: John 3:1-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

What if you got a sit-down with Jesus? You won a contest or a drawing for a night with Jesus. Just you and Him, one-on-one, no interruptions. What would you say? What would you ask? I've heard Christians - some of you - say things you'd like to ask Jesus when you get to heaven. We have so many questions.

Well Nicodemus got such a sit-down. Just Him and Jesus, one-on-one. And that's quite remarkable, isn't it? We have a God who sits and talks with people. How often does that happen today? We who are too busy to squeeze much into our busy schedules. And surely God is busier than we are! Surely He has more important things to do than sit down and talk with a Pharisee. Yet there He is. And I'm sure Nicodemus has a lot of questions teed up and ready to ask Jesus, just as we do.

But Nicodemus never gets a chance to ask! He barely gets through His opening comment about Jesus being *a teacher come from God* and that *no one could do these signs that you do unless God is with you* when Jesus seems to interrupt him. And the point is clear: Jesus isn't going to tell Nicodemus what he *wants* to know, but what he *needs* to know. For the answers to what Nicodemus - and we - *want* to know may satisfy our intellectual curiosity; but what we *need* to know is what saves us. And Jesus didn't come to satisfy our curiosity and answer all the questions we have - He came to save us. To save us by going to the cross. So Jesus is going to take Nicodemus *to the cross*.

And the first step to do that is to teach Nicodemus that *he can't do it* - something that no Pharisee would believe on his own. Because the Pharisees were all about knowing the Law and keeping the Law; being the best that they could be. And they were very good at it. And the people of that day looked up to the Pharisees and thought that surely, if *anyone* was good, if *anyone* was pleasing to God, if *anyone* deserved to be saved, it was the Pharisees.

So step one: Jesus blows that out of the water. *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

It's a great line! And the meaning is unmistakable. Because you have nothing to do with

being born. It wasn't your idea. You didn't decide to be born. You didn't pick your parents. In fact, babies sometimes don't want to come out of the womb and have to be forced out! No, being born is just something that happens *to* you. And so it will be with the kingdom of God. If you want to see it, if you want to be there, you can't do it, you can't achieve it - God must do it. You must be born all over again. *Born* into life in this kingdom.

Well, Nicodemus is flummoxed. This kind of thinking is the exact 180 degree opposite of the way a Pharisee thinks. A Pharisee whose identity is all about doing and achieving. In fact, so ridiculous is this to Nicodemus that he asks Jesus a ridiculous question about it - taking Jesus' words to an absurd extreme. How can someone crawl back up into his mother's womb for this to happen? How am *I* supposed to do this? How am *I* to achieve such a thing, Jesus? Nicodemus is still focused on what *he* is to do.

So Jesus tells him again. But a little differently this time. ***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*** That is, it's not about your mother, Nicodemus. It's about the Spirit. You don't do it, the Spirit does. This is a new kind of birth, Nicodemus. A spiritual one. You may be a child of Abraham by your natural birth, by your maternal birth. But you are a child of God by spiritual birth, a second birth, a new birth. Born again with a new life and a new name and a new identity.

Now if you were a first or second century Christian hearing these words of John read, you would recognize that this is exactly what happened to you in baptism. This is (kind of) John's Great Commission. *Go and make disciples of all nations. How? Baptizing them and teaching them.* Give them this new birth of the Spirit, and teach them about it. And realize that's who *you* are - whatever century you live in. A child of God. A child who doesn't do but receives everything - your life, your identity - from God. And so it must be. If you try to do it or achieve it yourself, you will fail. This birth is the work of the Spirit alone. The Spirit who comes through water and the Word.

Well, Nicodemus is like the baby in the womb that doesn't want to come out! This is so foreign to the way he is used to thinking; that he doesn't want to come out of. And many people today are the same way, and try to stay in the world they know, the world of what *they* do, rather than be born into a new world and a new life. So, Nicodemus asks, *how can this possibly be true? How can these things be?* And I wonder: did Nicodemus ask that mockingly, like he didn't believe it, or earnestly, like he wanted to?

Either way, Jesus is now ready to move on the second step of Nicodemus' education. Nicodemus is having a hard time wrapping his head around heavenly things, so Jesus reminds him of an earthly thing . . . Remember that story from Israel's time in the wilderness, Nicodemus? You know, the one you learned in Sabbath School when the serpents were biting the people of Israel and the people were dying? What happened? The

people couldn't save themselves, could they? But God could. And did. He told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it up on a pole. Lift it high up so everyone could see it. And God attached His Word and promise to that bronze serpent on the pole - a Word and promise for Moses to shout to all the people. To save them. That if you got bit, all you had to do was look at that bronze serpent lifted high and you wouldn't die. You would live. God provided a way of life. A way to live. You loved that story growing up, didn't you Nicodemus?

Well that story is going to happen now. *The real thing*. For that story from so many years ago was great, and a lot of people were saved. But Nicodemus, you ain't seen nothing yet! Because that was just the shadow of the real thing. Yes it really and truly happened, but it was also pointing to something even bigger and greater that was going to happen. Because just ***as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life***. That whoever is bitten by satan and injected with the venom of sin and cannot save themselves, there's a way. To life. Nothing you do, just as there was nothing those people in the wilderness could do. Just look in faith at the one God was going to lift up. And Nicodemus, it won't be just a man lifted up, but the very Son of God!

Because Nicodemus, God isn't about you doing it - you can't. All you can do is die from your bite, your sin. But God could then, and God can now. Because He loves you. ***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life***. That's what it's all about Nicodemus. That's what I'm all about.

We don't hear anything else from Nicodemus. No rebuttal. No objection. Nothing. Stunned silence, I suppose, at such words. Such astonishing words. That if he were to be saved, it wasn't anything he could do. Was it really not enough being a descendant of Abraham? Did he really need to be born again? Was he really just a newborn and not an accomplished Pharisee? Was it really all about seeing the Son of God lifted up on the cross? Was the Exodus really happening again - only bigger? Not an exodus from Egypt, but from sin and death? Nicodemus had started by saying that ***no one could do these signs that you do unless God is with him***. But truly, no one could speak these words that you do unless . . . Could it be?

Nicodemus didn't get all his questions answered that night. In fact, he may have left with more than he came with! He didn't get what he *wanted* to know, but he did get what he *needed* to know.

And he would see the Son of God lifted up on the cross. In fact, he would not only see him there, Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus down from the cross and place Him in the tomb. Did he know? Did he believe? I'd like to think so . . . just as I'd like to think that those who do not now believe will before it is too late. I pray so.

But this season of Lent isn't about what happened to Nicodemus, but what happens to you. Because God didn't just so love the world - **He loves you**. And He sent His Son for you. And He baptized you. And He preaches to you. And He feeds you. And He bids you to find your life in Him. In His Words and promises. In His forgiveness as the anti-venom to sin and death.

Lent is about realizing how we have been trying to save ourselves, even though we know better. Or ought to. How we've been trying to be grown-up Christians instead of newborns. Looking at what we do, rather than what Jesus has done for us.

Lent is about repenting of ourselves and our wanting - or demanding - all the answers, and believing the Words and promises of God. That what Jesus spoke that night to Nicodemus is true for us today. That the Son of Man, the Son of God, was lifted up on the cross for us, that whoever believes in Him may have a life that is eternal. A life that doesn't end with death, but goes on. Past the grave. *Through* the grave. Because He went through the grave to life again. And so He raises us as well. From the dust of death. A real exodus, from a real wilderness, to a real promised land.

Lent is about looking to that cross again, and seeing our life in Jesus' death. That just as God used a serpent on a pole to save from serpents' bites, so He used death on the cross to save us from death. Look there, He says, and see your salvation. Your saving.

So maybe you have a lot of questions you'd like to ask God. Have a sit down with Him, one-on-one. But I'm not sure you'd get all the answers you *want* to know. I think, instead, Jesus would tell you what you *need* to know.

That when He baptized you, you were born again of water and the Spirit.

That when He absolves you, your sins really are forgiven and the venom of sin and death in you counteracted.

That when He gives you His Body and Blood, that's the very same Body that Nicodemus helped lift down from the cross, and the very same Blood that stained his clothes that day, but now risen from the grave Nicodemus laid Him in and given to you for forgiveness and life.

That when He was on that cross, He was there for you, with your sin, and happy that it was on Him and not on you. Because He came then and He comes now not to condemn you, but to save you. So look to Him and live. You can't do it, but He can. And did. For you.

So when the devil bites, when death stings, when sin comes bursting out of you, or

crashing down upon you, when your mind is filled with questions and your heart is filled with doubts, when you are troubled, when your sin and failure seems too much to forgive, when the cares and fears of this world seem too much, when sorrows seem to be your daily bread, when evil seems to be winning and there seems to be no end in sight, when you think you can't go on . . . look at the cross, the Son of God lifted up for you. There is the atonement for your sin. There is your death's death. There is the defanging of the devil. So there is the promise of life for you. For God so loved. . . you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.